

e-Update No 8 August 2011

IOSF Plans for Further Work in Asia

At the time of writing we have just submitted a funding application to expand our work in Asia to combat the trade in otters, both as skins and as pets. We would be working with the wildlife trade monitoring network, TRAFFIC, who will visit markets to monitor the trade and also encourage better law enforcement. We will organise workshops to train more otter scientists who will continue field work, public awareness and education. We will also be



working to encourage the Indonesian government to protect the Asian short-clawed otter which, unlike the other three species found in that country, has no legal protection at present.



The Peace Bell, South Korea
(Photo: the late Jim Conroy)
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Otters in Asia deserve a more elevated position in the public eye and we must work towards the regional recognition of otters as precious keystone species of environmental success. In South Korea, otters are symbols of peace and in China cranes, pandas and river dolphins are National Monuments. Why not otters as national ambassadors to a healthy environment?

This collaboration has the potential to give some really positive results in otter conservation and we will keep you informed.

Mazu Caption Competition

Last month we gave you the latest update on Mazu. As you know, we are supporting



Mazu (Photo: Glen & Rita Chapman)

Sico and Delphin who are looking after Mazu while Glen and Rita are in America. So we thought it would be a fun idea to have a caption competition – what do you think Mazu is saying or thinking here?

Send your entry via the [Ottershop](#) with a minimum donation of £1 which will go towards her care.

The best entry will receive the prize of one of our [Plush Otters](#) .

Otters are now in every County in England

Recently in the press we have read that otters are now present in every county of England having finally been seen in Kent, which was the last county with no otters. This is great news but we do have to be careful that we don't get complacent.

It was reported that the river Ribble had seen a 44% increase in otter numbers in the last three years, which is just impossible as they simply don't breed that fast! But otter surveys are done using spraints (faeces) and so they are only saying that the number of SPRRAINTS has increased by 44% which is a totally different thing.

In 1986 otter researchers published a paper following some research in Shetland on the use of spraints to survey populations of otters [Kruuk, Conroy, Glimmerveen, and Ouwerkerk (1986), Biological Conservation 35 187-194]. They concluded that "there was no correlation between sprainting and the frequency of use of an area by otters. This casts doubt on the use of spraint surveys as a method to assess habitat utilisation by otters".

Obviously if a spraint is present an otter must have been there but other than that they cannot be used to estimate otter numbers. Spraints give no indication as to whether the otter is resident or breeding and there is also a seasonality in sprainting activity on land.

We also don't know if an otter now has to travel further to find food and holts so that home ranges may have become larger. Without detailed studies we cannot say that otter numbers have increased so much and it is dangerous to do this.



We are already hearing rumblings from certain members of the angling community that a cull of otters is needed. Not every angler feels this way and we have had some really positive feedback from some anglers who think

that spotting an otter whilst out fishing is the icing on the cake. However, if there is an impression that there are lots of otters everywhere there will be more pressure on them. But as one angler put it to me, "if you own a shop and you leave the door open, don't be surprised if your stock has gone in the morning. It is the same with fishing – if you have a fishing lake protect it."

And there are options. There have been many trials at otter fencing to see which is most effective: electric fencing has been used to good advantage, however this requires monitoring and regular maintenance; chain link has been the wire of choice for many years due to its finer mesh, but it can be costly and labour intensive. But now McVeigh



Parker (<http://www.mcveighparker.com>) have come up with an answer. They produce various agricultural fences and are now launching an otter XFENCE which has been designed to protect inland fisheries and enable highway exclusion, so that it has an extra use in keeping otters off the road. The fence has a patented four wrap hinge joint within the fence pattern which allows it to have a

fold either at the top or bottom of the fence which will act as a defence to burrowing or climbing predators, such as otters.

One argument put to us against fencing is the size of the lakes which have to be protected but McVeigh Parker have recently completed a 3500m otter exclusion fence around four fishing lakes for Hawbridge fishery in Worcestershire. So to any anglers we would say protect your stock and then you and the otters can live in peace.

Charity Auction for the Otters

As you know, we will be holding an auction at [Ledgowan Lodge Hotel](#) in Achnasheen, Ross-shire on Saturday 24 September. Amongst the lots will be a number of collectible Border Fine Arts otters and other unique items.



Taking the plunge

We will be posting the list of lots on our website but you will be able to see the various items at the hotel from 2-6pm and the auction will start at 7pm.

However if you cannot attend in person certain lots will be available online and you can bid by email to Enquiries@otter.org, subject heading 'Charity Auction'.

If you have any items which you wish to donate for sale at the auction please contact enquiries@otter.org.



Lord of the River

It promises to be a fun evening and we hope to see you at Ledgowan – check the website if you would like to stay the night: <http://www.ledgowanlodge.co.uk/>

Wildcare Conference

As we said in our June update, this year we are organising the annual conference for the British Wildlife Rehabilitation Council (BWRC), which will be held at the Ramada Jarvis Hotel, Inverness on Friday 21 and Saturday 22 October.



This is an annual gathering of vets and rehabbers who come together to listen to a variety of speakers, exchange tips and advice, and make contact with others working in this field. The Inverness event is always popular as the overnight stay gives time for people to chat informally and swap stories and experience.

You can find the programme and book online at the Ottershop or if you have any questions please contact enquiries@otter.org.

Loss of Predators is Our Biggest Impact

A new report has been published in the journal "Science" which states "The loss of apex consumers is arguably humankind's most pervasive influence on the natural world," The report is by a group of scientists including James Estes, who has done pioneering work on the ecological roles of sea otters.

The study looked at the massive decline of top predators, such as wolves, lions, sharks and sea otters and what effect this has had on their ecosystem. Estes noted dramatic effects in coastal ecosystems caused by changes in sea otter populations as the otters prey on sea urchins which graze on kelp. When numbers of otters were low there was a vast increase in sea urchins and the kelp forests largely disappeared with the knock-on effect on species

living there. However, as the otters recovered they controlled the sea urchins and as a result the kelp forests and the biodiversity recovered.

The decline in populations of large predators mostly as a result of human activity has had some unexpected consequences, including changes in vegetation, wildfire frequency, infectious diseases, invasive species, water quality, and nutrient cycles. This has been



called a “trophic cascade” meaning a chain of effects that move down through the levels of the food chain.

James Estes is professor of ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and he says “The top-down effects of apex consumers in an ecosystem are fundamentally important, but it is a complicated phenomenon. They have diverse and powerful effects on the ways ecosystems work, and the loss of these large animals has widespread implications.”

A co-author, William Ripple, a professor of forestry at Oregon State University went on to say “We now have overwhelming evidence that large predators are hugely important in the function of nature, from the deepest oceans to the highest mountains, the tropics to the Arctic.

In a broad view, the collapse of these ecosystems has reached a point where this doesn’t just affect wolves or aspen trees, deforestation or soil or water. These predators and processes ultimately protect humans. This isn’t just about them, it’s about us.”

IOSF has argued for a long time that if we look after our otters then the organisms in the food chain below will also be protected and this is borne out by this recent study.

If you would like to read more about this go to <http://news.ucsc.edu/2011/07/apex-consumers.html>

Cubs at the Sanctuary

Shannon is the latest arrival at the sanctuary. She is about four months old and was found in Donegal, Ireland. Unfortunately long-term rehabilitation care is not available for otters in Ireland so, like Guinness and Tipple did before, she had to make the long journey to Skye. She stopped off at the SSPCA Wildlife Unit at Middlebank for a while as we felt it would be too stressful for her to complete the journey in one go.

As we have found before, Irish otters look quite different to our own – they are much darker (plain chocolate-coloured whereas ours are more milk-chocolate!) and they have strong creamy colour markings on the lower lip and neck. They also have a much rounder head.

She is now in the cub pen and eating well and you can watch her through the webcam.

We actually have two webcams online now so that you can continue to watch the progress of our Inverness otter with the broken legs. He is still in the nursery pen as we want him to have plenty of time to recuperate quietly and for the bones to heal. He will move to one of the





croft pens in due course where he will have more freedom.

Thanks to everyone who has sent in a suggestion for a name for him – we will make the draw on 1 September and post the result on the Blog.

As you can see Dee and Luce are quite comfortable in their sleeping box. They have started collecting their own bedding which is a

good sign to see. And Lilly is as elusive as ever which is wonderful.



Dee and Luce

If you would like to donate towards the care of the otters at our sanctuary please send a cheque marked "Hospital" on the back or you can donate at www.ottershop.co.uk

Giant Otters in Yorkshire!

We were amused by a recent article in the Yorkshire post about volunteers collecting spraint and sending it to Wales for a detailed study into the role of scent in otter communication. The thing that really amused us was the photo accompanying the article – two GIANT otters which are normally found in the Amazon!

<http://www.yorkshireeveningpost.co.uk/news/latest-news/central-leeds/success-for-west-yorkshire-otter-poo-in-the-post-1-3699851>

Product of the Month (E-Adoption £14.99)

If you would prefer that every penny of your money goes directly into helping our work with otters then our e-certificate is perfect for you. You will automatically receive a link to download the certificate (find it on the page before you make your payment and on your receipt email and is only available for 72 hrs) and you will be included on our emailing list for our regular e-newsletters and updates. If this is a gift, please advise us of the recipient's email address.



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International Otter Survival Fund
7 Black Park
Broadford
Isle of Skye
IV49 9DE
Scotland

Tel/Fax: ++(0)1471 822 487



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